FIELD VISIT SUMMARY – BALD MOUNTAIN HRCA
Dinkey Collaborative
August 16, 2012
Dinkey Landscape Restoration Project, Sierra National Forest

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1. Welcome and Orientation

Mr. Mosé Jones-Yellin, High Sierra District Deputy Ranger, Sierra National Forest, welcomed all participants to the field visit. The facilitator, Mr. Dorian Fougeres, reviewed the day's agenda and meeting ground rules.

2. Pollard Camp HRCA and Markwood Meadow Encroachment

District Wildlife Biologist Ms. Kim Sorini-Wilson oriented the group, noting that the group stood in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) defnese zone, and the Home Range Core Area (HRCA) surrounding the Protected Activity Center (PAC) for spotted owl #2 in the Bald Mountain area. The facilitator explained that the idea for looking at what to do in the PAC and HRCA came from the field trip to the area in May, when one stakeholder suggested it might be possible to propose a non-significant Land Management Plan amendment to allow for a treatment in the PAC that yielded useful information. At the time there was no specific proposal, just the urge to do something

differently, similar to projects the Collaborative had done in the past. In the proposed Reese Unit part of Bald Mountain, for example, Mr. Craig Thompson suggested treating the area mechnically under controlled conditions to better understand Pacific fisher response; one member disagreed and did not think Mr. Thompson proposed including mechanical treatment.

ACTION ITEM: Mr. Thompson to clarify his proposal for the Reese Unit.

It was noted that the current version of the Proposed Action is the same version distributed in June, and does not reflect Collaborative conversations since that time. The facilitator noted he would assist Forest Service staff in creating a list of recent comments/issues.

ACTION ITEM: Mr. Fougères to create a composite list of comments/issues on the Bald Mountain Proposed Action, based on recent field visits and meetings.

Several member expressed concern about the pending Scoping Notice for Bald Mountain, noting they did not have basic information like a unit map, and the Collaborative process placed a premium on stakeholders being on the same page with Forest Service staff. Additionally, the group had never clearly decided whether to include the Reese Unit. Mr. Jones-Yellin suggested discussing the scoping notice during the main meeting on Friday, and agreed that a choice needed to be made about the inclusion of the Reese Unit once the stand exam data was complete.

The group briefly discussed the information it would like to inform the meadow field visit scheduled for September 19. It was noted that the area was harvested from the 1880s through the 1910s, and given from Fresno Flume and Lumber/SCE to the Forest Service in 1933, with grazing from the turn of the century into the 1950s, with more tree removal in the 1960s and especially 1970s. Topics included:

- Need clear statement of desired conditions and supporting rationale, and potential treatments (e.g., hand thinning, prescribed fire, mastication, snag creation, mechanical removal)
- The results of the historical photo interpretation as well as field investigations of soils
    - historical expansion/contraction of the meadow in different areas, and the historical presence of conifers
- Regarding great grey owls
    - the structure and history of the PAC
    - how encroachment positively or negative affects owl use of the area
        - it was noted that “encroachment” could be understood to presume a negative movement, whereas expansion and contraction of a meadow also occurred naturally
    - possibilities for enhancement (similar work was done on the Stanislaus NF)
- Opportunities for maintaining willows on the edges, including the use of prescribed fire and/or conifer removal
    - this includes the smaller species of willow
- Opportunites for snag creation
- Regarding deer
    - appropriate levels and qualities of grass, forbs, brush needed for foraging
    - how to balance the tension between visual quality objectives (i.e., seeing the meadow from the roadside) and roadside screening of the holding area for deer

    - there was a study of cattle use of the meadow between 1972-82 that would be a good reference
- Cultural resources
- Meadow hydrology

3. Upslope in the Pollard Camp HRCA

The group hiked uphill from the parking area to another part of the HRCA, stillin the WUI. (Just below the number "2" in "Stop 2" on the map.) The area was less than 35% slope so could be treated.

The group was asked what the objectives might be for the site.

- The site was south-facing so moderately open, 40-60% of canopy cover could be retained for spotted owl
- It was in 80-100% probability fisher territory, so the marking guidelines would apply
- Snags and large down logs could be created
- Given its location in the defense area, surface and ladder fuelds could be treated
- Pine could be promoted
    - There was disagreement over the historical stand composition and age of the larger fir and cedar. The heavy historical logging emphasis on pine was noted again.
- The use of prescribed fire to clear dry duff and brush, perhaps treated with limbing and piling before underburning to reduce ladder fuels, so long as there was future treatment to ensure the brush does not return too quickly
    - Browse enhancement for deer, for example, would require more than treatment every 10 years (white thorn is not very palatable after 3 years, for example)
    - Creation of more openings could help as well
    - The tension between pine planting and browse enhancement was noted, as both occur in open areas; it was also noted that good quality sites would encourage fast brush regrowth, so might not be the best location for such enhancements
    - It was not clear whether Markwood Meadow was close enough to provide grass and forbs for deer in the area
        - **ACTION ITEM**: Janet Sanchez to consult with the California Department of Fish and Game regarding deer design criteria
        - **ACTION ITEM**: Kim Sorini-Wilson to check with Craig Thompson regarding the value of dense mats of white thorn for fisher cover and hunting, in areas like Bear Fen
- Habitat enhancement for spotted owl, including small herbaceous plants that create the seeds eaten by owl prey

The group continued general discussion:

- It was noted that mechanical pre-treatment before prescribed burning as well as salvage logging after burning could affect the value of resulting habitat.
- It was noted that the PACs and HRCAs were configured based on owl use data provided by the Pacific Southwest Research Station (PSW), so the area does have good prey base

characteristics. Treatment would depend on things like canopy cover and other desired characteristics.

- In terms of fire, there was a high potential for wildfire to move up the hill. Prescribed burning was not reasonably feasible because the difficulty of creating extensive fire lines and needed monitoring. Historically the area had a median fire return interval of 9 to 13 years, meaning there was not much fuel on the ground and fires were generally low intensity.
- It was clarified that Forest Service direction prohibits the prescription of high intensity fire, given legal liabily and safety and administrative controls. In practice, however, prescriptions for mixed intensity allow for natural occurrence/escalation of high intensity fire, so this desired outcome could nonetheless be obtained.
    - Staff were working on expanding the associated variables to allow for more high intensity fire.
    - Another approach would be to call out "patches of high mortality" in the Proposed Action, which could be accomplished through prescribed fire and snag creation.
    - Another approach would be to recommend an amendment to the Land Management Plan that allowed for managed wildfire outside the wilderness areas.
    - **ACTION ITEM**: Add discussion of advancement of managed wildfire to future agenda.

4. Lunchtime Stop along Creek near Pollard Camp

It was noted that the group moved from the uphill site through the Protected Activity Center down to the creek, and that the stretch from the creek back to the meadow looked similar in terms of tree size and density. The immediate area was again in the HRCA and WUI defense.

- It was noted that the PAC area had high live tree basal area and canopy cover, with many standing snags and large down logs. In the immediate area there were fewer snags, so snag creation could be done to enhance habitat.
- There was disagreement over how much of an area around cabins needed to be treated.
    - It was noted that the concern was to protect not only structures but also people and firefighters protecting structures.
    - It was noted that embers can fly good distances and create spot fires.
    - A focus on protecting homes could emphasize creating defensible spaces and treating the immediate area surrounding a home, rather than far into the forest.
- It was suggested that restoration focus on reducing the probability of uncharacteristic fire that destroys habitat. Recognizing that high intensity fire could also provide habitat benefits, it would be important to determine the desired size of patches/extent of high intensity fire.
    - There was disagreement over the size of high intensity fire patches in mixed conifer forests in the area.
    - There was disagreement over the impact of high intensity fire on spotted owl nesting and foraging.
    - **ACTION ITEM**: Mr. Hanson to provide recent publications on connections between high intensity fire and spotted owl.

- It was noted that given the WUI, there were two things that would happen to fire in the area: it would be suppressed, or it would get out of control because of weather and the landscape.
- In the immediate stand it would be possible to retain structure for fisher den sites, retain density for owls, reduce standing and down fuels to meet defense objectives, and then shift the species compsition away from older white thorn thickets.
- Regarding platform trees (an example was noted), it would be important to not expose the bole, to keep small adjacent trees, and provide cover. Another option would be to leave the structure as high quality and take nothing. "High quality" could be relative to the site.

5. Stand 1140 near Swanson Meadow

The area was in the WUI threat zone, and a great grey owl PAC, so there were no specific guidelines to follow. District Silviculturalist Mr. Ramiro Rojas noted the desire to create heterogeneous structure, yet all trees in the area were greater than 30" diameter at breast height (dbh). So the challenge was how to create such structure without removing large trees. There were 5-6 stands like this in the area, around 300 acres in size each.

- It was commented that adequate vertical and horizontal heterogeneity existed including snags and large down logs, natural regeneration patches, an understory layer, and clumps. Additional snags could be created.
- Treatment options depend on scale: is the heterogeneity desired at the scale of individual acres, 20 acres, 60 acres?
- It was commented that heterogeneity exists but not a good balance: there are big tree patches, and many examples of individuals of other sizes, but not enough patches of small and medium trees.
- The area would be considered to have a high quality fisher clump. It was also important to consider what conditions were needed to create future den structures. Density could be important. Cedars with snapped tops might also be important; whether they would continue to grow depended on the total amount of remaining live crown.
    - **ACTION ITEM**: Ms. Sorini-Wilson to consider adding guidelines around platform tree retention to the fisher marking guideilnes.
- White pine blister rust was not prevalent, so the white pine could be kept. It was noted that once the rust takes hold of an already deformed tree, it was unlikely that the tree would get much bigger and eventually create fisher nesting or resting structure.

Mr. Rojas proposed removing a 24" fir to better define the middle story, and also removing some sugar pine because of rust. He suggested it was important to avoid thinning from below because this eventually only raised the crown and lost the understory complexity. Current LiDAR data would help determine canopy cover but did not characterize heterogeneity well, so the Remote Sensing Lab was returning to survey a larger area.

- It was noted that several 20-30" trees exist, and that turning larger trees into stumps removed their habitat value.
- Green pine trees do have commercial value.

- Another member suggested that there were several small trees but few if any pines. Small fir could be removed for pine planting.
- The area could be prescribed burned given its physical boundaries, with little preparation. It would require multiple entries and a low intensity fire the first time.
    - It was suggested to apply prescribed fire without mechanical treatment.
    - Another question was whether the fire would remove the small brush and create sufficient patches for pine planting.
    - Another challenge would be how to protect fisher clumps, if more smaller trees (which would burn more readily) were retained in these clumps. It was noted that high and medium quality clumps typically did not have significant understory components, so not a lot of fire line would be needed.
- Noting that treatment would be paid for by CFLR dollars, it was emphasized that the economics of treatment needed to be included in conversations to better weigh the value of proposed work and funding options. Salvage logging could pay for pine planting, for example.
- Mr. Jones Yellin stated that the Bald Mountain project, whether in the Reese Unit or elsewhere, would need to try some mechanical treatment work in high quality fisher area to promote learning.
    - It was commented that mixed intensity prescribed fire could be applied in high quality fisher territory, along with snag and downed log creation, and that the larger effort could consider mechanical treatment so long as this was not the primary emphasis. It was reiterated that one should not assume that high intensity fire is bad for fisher – this has not been scientifically tested.
- It was noted that the possibility of applying prescribed fire was limited, so the group should also consider other options. Thinning from below only would create new California Spotted Owl (CASPO) special areas that lack all size classes.
- The visual quality of the area could likely be maintained if a variety of size classes were present.
- The distinction between 0.4 and 0.8 or 1 probability of fisher habitat use was not felt to be significant. The area was not known to have a lot of fisher activity, so treatment would be less risky. Downslope near Blue Canyon would be harder.
- One option would be to design a demonstration forest with several small and viewable treatments that intersect at a designated spot. Treatments like burn only, harvest and burn, treat directly, and treat more heavily – three or four treatments, linked by a story explaining what is trying to be done and what is trying to be learned. The small scale of the area created a good opportunity for examining new ideas. Each area could have its own objectives. Monitoring would be critical.
- It was noted that about 80% of the Bald Mountain area, if treated, would involve burn only prescriptions. This would be visible on the GIS information provided on August 17. There were few areas where homes or fuels or accessibility made this impossible.

The group stopped briefly at another site along the way back, a small white fir. It was suggested that if the tree had a fisher cavity, the understory could be retained so that there are

adjacent trees to guard the bole and there are little trees for entry and exit. This is how fisher marking guideline discussions from the previous month could be immediately applied. Also oaks with cavities would be left; cavities often have more moisture that helps with heat insulation, and these should be retained even if overtopped. This was one way to create future fisher habitat.

6. Attendees

1. Justin Augustine
2. Rich Bagley
3. Carolyn Ballard
4. Keith Ballard
5. Sue Britting
6. Kent Duysen
7. Dorian Fougères, CCP
8. Julie Gott, SNF
9. Chad Hanson
10. Stan Harger
11. Adam Hernandez, SNF
12. Mosé Jones-Yellin, SNF
13. Ray Laclergue
14. John Mount
15. Ramiro Rojas, SNF
16. Janet Sanchez, SNF
17. Mark Smith
18. Kim Sorini-Wilson, SNF
19. Stan Van Velsor
20. Cindy Whelan, SNF